

Finding your way about

Architects' love/hate relationship with signage may be mediated by the arrival of the wayfinding consultant.

BY NICK HAWKSWORTH

Wayfinding is about directing a user through a public or private space. Once seen as an instinctual aspect of good architecture, in many instances it is now relegated to an afterthought. However, if done correctly, it brings together a variety of skills and creative resources and embraces an understanding of surface textures and finish, colour, landscaping, features, acoustics as well as the ubiquitous graphics signage, to facilitate a more comfortable use of a building.

Unfortunately, finding your way about a building is not as straightforward as it might seem and, contrary to assumptions, users do not adapt happily to inadequate routing. There is science and skill in wayfinding and it encompasses many facets of design, graphics, materials technology and an understanding of the political elements included in developing buildings and landscapes for public or private use. It is incredible that, in this country, we do not routinely use these skills.

What is wayfinding ?

Primarily, it should be common sense. Wayfinding is about maximising our experience within a space greeting, explaining and directing using various methods (not just signs) to guide people to destinations without the user really knowing it. If it is done without the users' conscious intervention, then the job is done effectively. If the signage and signals enhance the experience, then it is done properly.

About 80 per cent of our postoccupancy evaluation studies in the UK mention poor signing in their top 10 major problem areas. This highlights a problem with our general approach in this country whereas wayfinding is commonplace in the US. Let us explore the problems.

A design and build contractor, say, calls in a signage company just as the building is nearing completion. The sign specialist then supplies the contractor

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with a schedule. The timescale is very tight and the funding is buried in the total package. Ruthless tendering ensues, and the winning manufacturer sets about designing a system to complement the client's wishes but using standard specifications from its own product portfolio. Inevitably, corners are cut to save money and the building is left with a cosmetic system that either needs major updating very soon after occupancy, or is just left as an inadequate system. Either way, it is frustrating for the user (and infuriating for the client).

This situation results mainly from a lack of forethought by the architect or main contractor about who is going to use the space and what will help them to use it. It is compounded by pressure on time and budgets and lack of awareness. During the course of my research, I have come to the conclusion that there are many new projects unfolding in the UK that still do not have clear, concise, obvious wayfinding.

The Tate Modern at Bankside, however, is an example of a user-orientated approach to wayfinding. Architect Herzog & de Meuron has created an amazing building.

The theory that spaces explain themselves and users will be able to

find their way around without aid is laudable, but not true. The client understood this point and contracted Alexandra Wood - a wayfinding consultant - who helped develop a wayfinding strategy. The architect accepted much of it, which led to a comprehensive internal wayfinding approach which aids the users to a degree but allows the building to function as a 'wandering stroll' for the user, embracing the original vision of Herzog & de Meuron.

A recent Channel Four TV documentary about the Tate, *Power into Art*, only showed the arguments between the architect and the marketing consultants.

Tate Modern's wayfinding strategy is still evolving. The building has experienced a user turnover far in excess of estimations, which highlighted further problem areas to be dealt with as an ongoing concern; tackling issues from a user perspective. It also has to be said that an earlier introduction of the wayfinding analysis - of people movement and user dynamics - might have led to a reassessment of the size of rooms required to cater for large numbers.

The experience of Tate Modern shows that you can never completely predict how a space will operate until it opens. But by using an independent wayfinding consultant - working with architects and designers - you can predict a large proportion of it, identify worrying areas, develop a routing and fire escape strategy and design an effective solution utilising the many facets of wayfinding before the space opens.

This leaves more time for signage manufacture, and since the wayfinding consultant is not tied to a manufacturer, you can take the best products and skills from each.

It is only a matter of time before wayfinding analysis becomes common practice in the UK. A strategy of comprehensive, independently budgeted wayfinding and sign design will hopefully lead to buildings that give discreet guidance to the public and provide a more enjoyable user experience.

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A sign of the times ... wayfinding is all about using common sense

